

Station Life in New Zealand

by *Lady Mary Anne Barker*



Lake Coleridge Station -- Charles Decimus Barraud, 1870

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Station Life in New Zealand is a collection of cheerful and interesting letters written by Lady Mary Anne Barker (nee Mary Anne Stewart) that is a New Zealand "classic". These letters are described in the Preface as "the exact account of a lady's experience of the brighter and less practical side of colonisation". The letters were written between 1865 and 1868 and cover the time of her travel with her husband (Frederick Broomie) to New Zealand and life on a colonial sheep-station at their homestead "Broomielaw", located in the Province of Canterbury, South Island of New Zealand. Although these letters are written with great humour and fine story telling, her life was marred by tragedy while in Canterbury through the illness and eventual death of her baby son.

The first four ships of settlers that colonised the Canterbury region had only arrived in 1850. Consequently, little was known about, for example, the irregular Canterbury weather patterns that would dominate the lives of Lady Barker and her husband for those three short years. She describes the regular predations of the Canterbury nor'wester (a type of Föhn wind), including its role in completely blowing away her attempts at establishing a croquet lawn, the devastating effects of snow storm that killed over half of their sheep, and of a great flood that not only flooded Christchurch but demolished her poultry and nearly drowned her husband.

Lady Mary Anne Barker was a strong horse woman and very keen for all sorts of "adventures". She describes instigating a bitterly cold late autumn overnight camping trip to the top of their nearest hill, Flagpole, followed the next morning by a serene sunrise over the Canterbury plains. In other letters, she describes her pride and enjoyment at joining and keeping up with nine men, who doubted her abilities, for long hours of walking in untracked, untamed bush with the aim of hunting wild cattle; and her joy at setting ablaze the tussock grasslands on their sheep station in spite of the risk to her eyelashes. As one of the few women in her part of Canterbury at the time, she also helped provide the neighbourhood with books to read, and baptism and schools for children. Lady Mary Anne Barker and her husband returned to England at the end of 1868.

Read by Gail Timmerman-Vaughan. Total running time: 06:01:38

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